



Archie Cochrane

Man of genius with feet of clay!

Talk given by Peter Elwood
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In 1948 Archie Cochrane joined the MRC Pneumoconiosis Unit in Cardiff and in 1959 he was appointed David Davies Professor of Chest Diseases in the Welsh National School of Medicine. In 1960 MRC set up the Epidemiological Research Unit under Cochrane, and I joined the unit in 1963. We worked together – happily, and I believe most fruitfully – until close to his death in 1988

Archie was a epidemiologist from head to toe! He had a burning desire to contribute an epidemiological viewpoint to almost every field of clinical work. He helped to make field epidemiology a quantitative science and he had an almost obsessional interest in the reproducibility of measurements, and the representativeness of subjects selected (randomly, of course) for his studies. Indeed we used to refer to ‘Cochrane Units’ – less than a 90% compliance rate was quite unacceptable, and a 95% compliance represented 5 Cochrane points!

Archie will be well remembered for his promotion of the randomised controlled trial, and none more than the clinicians whom he used to taunt for their uncontrolled observations! Yet Archie himself never conducted an RCT. The nearest he got to this was in a study of the treatment of famine oedema by yeast within a prisoner of war camp in Salonica. I persuaded him to write an account of this study and it was published in the BMJ (1984;289:1726-7).

Archie was a delightful man to work with. He was a lateral thinker and had a steady flow of ideas for new, or better, research studies. Although he demanded the very highest of standards, he was a great encourager, and he had a most helpful ability to spot a weakness in a protocol, an error in an analysis or an inconsistency in a report. He had a great concern for preventive medicine and indeed he occasionally remarked that the treatment of a disease, whether successful or not, represents a failure in prevention. His concern for prevention led him, while in the prisoner of war camp to write a poem: ‘Superfluous Doctors, with the lines:

*'And now let doctors quit the centre stage
To usher in the prophylactic age'*

Archie will however be best, and most widely remembered for his part in the ‘Cochrane Collaboration’. Archie was highly critical of reports which were based on selected studies, selected usually because the evidence in them suited the speaker or writers own bias. Archie called repeatedly for analyses, or ‘overviews’ of all the available, unbiased evidence on every clinical procedure, to be repeated at intervals as new evidence became available. Iain Chalmers, now Sir Iain, heard Archie talk about this, and he went on to establish the Cochrane, ‘The Cochrane Collaboration’, and this in turn leading to a paradigm shift in medical research and clinical practice through the introduction of ‘systematic reviews’ and ‘evidence-based medicine’.

Despite Archie was a very lonely man and, as he himself put it: ‘He was a man... without the consolation of a wife, a religious belief, or a merit award...’ Being a very wealthy man, the merit award was no worry and although he called himself an atheist, at his end he asked for a Christian burial service. It was a close companion, or wife, which he missed most, and although many of us, and particularly some of the women in his MRC Unit showed him great respect and affection, he was close to no one.

The prestigious Cochrane Building of the School of Medicine in Cardiff University, on the University Hospital of Wales site, is an appropriate memorial to this remarkable man.

